Drew James
Earns
Master Model Railroader® #762

I started in the hobby as an 11-year-old when I received an HO-scale AHM train set for Christmas. I loved that train set and added to it year after year. My parents were supportive and gave me space in the basement. When I left home, my train "setups" on the floor with Lego buildings had grown into something resembling a model railroad with DC block control, a yard, and multiple elevations.

I devoured all the model railroading books and magazines I could find and wore out "The Complete Book of Model Railroading" by David Sutton. "The V&O Story" in *Railroad Model Craftsman* significantly impacted me. I soon found myself trying simple car-forwarding systems, and my future layout designs all tried to go somewhere rather than just around in circles. As I went to college, I continued reading magazines and started to travel by rail. A family Amtrak trip to the West Coast and back and subsequent trips across Canada cemented my love for train travel and passenger trains.

After graduating from college, starting a new career, and marrying my wonderful wife, Karel, we moved to Syracuse, New York, and purchased our first home, which had space allocated for a train room in the basement. My dad helped me finish the train room, and I built two different layouts while we lived there, but most of my time was focused on our new family and other responsibilities. These layouts were learning experiences.

In 2000, we moved to a new house with a new train room in the basement. I built a modest layout, which I ran alone. However, that all started to change after Bob Vickery got me an invitation to an operating session at the late Dick Martini's wonderful layout of Central New York. I was blown away by attending my first "real" operating session. More importantly, I started to meet a group of friendly guys who were all Central New York Division members, so I also became a member. I got invitations to operate on other members' layouts, such as Dave Martini's CSX Northeast and Bill Brown's Leadville & Red Cliff.

As a result of these operating sessions and seeing many beautiful layouts at NMRA meetings, I almost completely rebuilt my layout. I installed DCC, changed the track layout for smoother operations, and upgraded the scenery. I started hosting some of my new NMRA friends for op sessions, and they provided encouragement and motivation. At some point, Dave Martini mentioned that I should start tracking my operating hours to earn the Chief Dispatchers AP certificate. In 2014, I had enough hours, did the required paperwork, and earned my first certificate.

In the next year or so, I earned the Scenery and Electrical Engineer certificates. With a working layout and completed scenery, it was mostly a matter of doing the paperwork and getting the scenery evaluated for merit. At that point, I had three certificates and started to think that maybe I could get the seven required for MMR in my lifetime.

As my children, Brad and Nate, grew up and moved on to college, I became more active in the NMRA. I hosted meetings, participated in our Division's operations weekend, and helped when we hosted the Region conventions. After a few years, I had enough hours for the Volunteer certificate. I enjoy writing articles and was published in the *NMRA Magazine* and OpSIG's *Dispatcher's Office,* as well as submitting articles to our Division and Region newsletters, which earned the Author certificate.

In 2015, Karel and I moved into a new house with the large empty basement every modeler dreams of having someday. With my NMRA friends' help, I aimed to build a large layout focused on operations. Dave Martini and I developed the track plan over several months, and construction started in August 2015. Many of our Division members helped with the construction: Bill Brown, Ed O'Rourke, Angel Bernard, Ken Cameron,

Ed Olszewski, Dick Hehir, Bob Vickery, Dave Martini, Rick Mneice, and others. This collaboration quickly moved the new Canada, Spokane & Pacific along; the first operating session was held in February 2017.

During the pandemic, I decided to work toward the Civil Engineering certificate. I met most of the requirements in building the new layout, but I needed to scratchbuild the required track components. This was daunting for me, but our Division had purchased for loan a set of Fast Tracks jigs and tools. It took a couple of months and multiple attempts, but before long I was down to needing just one more certificate.

I decided to attempt the Cars certificate. I knew this would be a major challenge as I had no experience with scratchbuilding or super-detailing cars. I started by optimistically believing I could scratchbuild four cars in parallel and knock them out in a couple of months. Six months later, I had completed only one car while the other three were abandoned along the way. I had a couple of cars that met the super-detailed requirements. At this point, I almost gave up on the AP and MMR as it felt like work rather than fun. However, a turning point came when I attended a clinic by John McHugh at the 2022 NER Convention on scratchbuilding a gondola for merit. I came home motivated to restart my effort, and over the next six months, I successfully built two gondolas, which achieved a merit score, and less than a year later, I completed all the AP requirements.

Many people have helped me along the way. Still, I am particularly indebted to MMR Bill Brown, Dave Martini, MMR Ed O'Rourke, Ed Olszewski, and Bob Verkuyl for their encouragement, support, and suggestions, which kept me on the path to success.

Certificates Earned
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Association Official
Association Volunteer
Master Builder – Cars
Master Builder – Scenery
Chief Dispatcher
Model Railroad Engineer – Electrical
Model Railroad Engineer – Civil
Model Railroad Author